# Taking a Relook at the Soviet Past

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## Introduction

There was a time when on social media we wrote extensively about the Soviet Union. We shared our thoughts on its history, society, economy, and its people. We remembered our numerous experiences of interacting with a wide spectrum of the Soviet people while we studied there (1976–1986). Having spent a considerable time of youth in the Soviet Union, there are very few who won't love that country and feel nostalgic about it. It is no secret much of what we wrote before was ideologically biased. We assumed the theory of socialist revolution had no inherent flaws. The state building that followed the revolution was perfect. An overarching assumption was that because V.I. Lenin, the consummate thinker and the leader of the global working class, led the revolution, handled its immediate aftermath and conceptualized the construction of the USSR, there shouldn't have been any serious mistake that could threaten the viability of the world's first socialist state. But was it?

What turned out was the state that Lenin constructed was poorly designed. It was so fragile that it lasted only seventy years. When it fell into pieces, the tremor it sent was deadlier than the fall of the Russian empire. And it is still reverberating. Thirty years later in 2022, a war broke out between Russia and Ukraine, the two key constituent republics of the USSR. The war has caused by now millions of deaths and destruction of unspeakable proportions on both sides and yet shows no sign of ebbing down. We now have a wide range of real world experiences that call into question the wisdom of converting post-Imperial Russia of 1917 into a staging ground for a socialist revolution. It was the first attempt to materialize Karl Marx's dream of building an equal and exploitation-free human society. Marx laid out this dream in the seminal work "Manifesto of the Communist Party" which he co-authored with his friend Friedrich Engels in 1847.

## The Revolution: Its timeliness

The revolution occurred only seventy years after the dream was articulated. Wasn't it too soon? Even Lenin was on record as admitting Russia's society then wasn't ripe for a socialist revolution. His best guess was it could have happened one hundred years later. But when the last Russian czar abdicated the throne and a Provisional Government assumed power in February 1917, the political situation fuelled by labour strikes and dissent in the Army started changing rapidly, Lenin had the skill to spot the right moment to seize power. That moment arrived on the night of 25 October 1917 when a group of armed workers and soldiers stormed the Winter Palace in Petrograd and forced at gunpoint the cabinet of the Provisional Government which was in meeting then to transfer power to the Bolshevist Party. This event has gone down in Soviet history as the Great October Socialist Revolution.

But if we inject a degree of realism into what happened, it was a typical civil-military coup that ousted a legitimate government of which Bolsheviks were also a part for some period. However, in its significance, it was a revolution. Because it signalled the beginning of changes at a pace never seen before to lift the society from poverty and backwardness and empower the working classes. But there was an inherent contradiction that never went away. It was a revolution done in a social and economic context which was

far from being the ideal for this purpose. V.I. Lenin made a number of exceptions and inserted own interpretations of Marxist theory to adapt to Russia's unique context. But it didn't yield the results the way it was expected to. Immediately after the revolution Lenin signed several decrees that abolished private ownership on all means of production; established workers' control on all mills, factories. Land was nationalized land, as were mineral resources and other vital assets. Workers were allowed to seize surplus agricultural production from large farmers in the countryside.

All these administrative and forced measures to abolish private ownership and quick empowerment of the working class that went into effect were commonly known as War Communism. But contrary to expectations, War Communism produced overall negative results for industrial production as well as food production in rural areas. In March 1921, Lenin abandoned War Communism and replaced it with the New Economic Policy (NEP). It was in essence restoration of capitalism but under the oversight of the state. It was a sort of state-controlled capitalism. Failure of War Communism brought to light difficulties that typically arise when something new is tried before the ground is prepared for doing that. It was akin to an attempt to grow a plant from an immature seed. If it is successful and the seedling emerges, it will still require extra care and caution to ensure it keeps growing.

A temporary retreat to capitalism was a that kind of effort to create necessary economic preconditions for abolishing private ownership and smooth transitioning to societal ownership of the means of production. While this strategy produced the desired result, challenges in the Soviet state building weren't easy to address. The Soviet state that was proclaimed in 1918 after the adoption of the constitution was called Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). It included the territories of the former Russian empire on which the Red Army established control by that time. The Soviet state formation was a work in progress as the Red Army was battling the White Army (loyalists of the Tsarist empire) in a civil war that broke out after the revolution. The civil war ended with the triumph of the Red Army in 1921 when most territories of the former empire came under its control. The key challenge then was how to incorporate conquered territories into a single Soviet state reshaping the vast landmass of the Russian empire. On this vital question, V.I. Lenin and Joseph Stalin had different opinions. Stalin's proposal was annexation of territories to the existing Russian Soviet Federation in the status of autonomous republics with a broad range of powers to exercise oversight on their internal affairs.

This option had the advantage of maintaining continuity of the historical Russian state. It would have preserved cultural cohesion among different nationalities centered on Russian identity and also keeping in place other advantages of centuries-long state building by the Tsars. But V.I. Lenin was more idealistic. He focused on turning Russia into a global centre of socialist revolution to spark, nurture, and actively support revolutions worldwide. State building in Lenin's view was as much as national as it was international. Lenin considered the historical Russian state, created by the Tsars, as oppressive. In this state, Russians occupied commanding heights in all spheres of society, dominated the ruling classes and subjugated other nationalities to colonial exploitation and suppression of their rights.

So, he decided to make a clean break from the empire and start a fresh beginning in state building based on his understanding of equality among nationalities and proletarian internationalism. His idea was

reorganizing the territories in a way that would have allowed most nationalities to have their own national republics demarcated by internal borders. These republics were created at different levels. Union Republics were created for major nationalities. These were similar to states or provinces in other large federal countries, for example, the US, Canada, and India but with more power.

Union Republics were conceived as the key building blocks of the proposed unified Soviet state. They had all the trappings of a sovereign independent country including the right to secede from the Union. This right didn't require any constitutional check, for example, holding referendums should any republic decide to do so. For smaller and minor nationalities, autonomous republics were created within Union republics with their own borders and constitutional provisions to exercise autonomy in their local affairs. In short, the landmass of the former Russian empire was divided into numerous mini-states of different sizes with their own borders to assemble them into a single state. This type of territorial reorganization was supposed to accommodate Marxist ideas about the state as an instrument for oppression of people. Therefore, Lenin set out to create a loose federal state where sovereign and equal mini-states would choose to live voluntarily rather than being forced to join the existing revolutionary state, the RSFSR, which Stalin proposed, as autonomous entities but without emphasis on ethnicity or nationality.

Stalin's model would have preserved the Russian empire with the difference that instead of monarchy it would have been a socialist, unitary proletarian state. Lenin had the illusion that construction of socialism and forging of collectivism would ignite a sense of brotherhood and proletarian internationalism among people of various nationalities. It would bind together the national republics in a single state. There was no bar for citizens to settle anywhere in the country. However, the creation of national republics unwittingly implied that the territory included in a national republic belongs to the people of that nationality. For example, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) belongs to Ukrainians or the Georgian SSR belongs to the Georgians.
Designating republics to specific nationalities created fertile ground for flourishing of tribal nationalism, which was absent in imperial Russia. This approach was self-contradictory. Because a growing sense of nationalism wasn't helpful for internationalism to strike roots deep in the society. Internationalism requires blurring the sense of belonging to specific ethnic groups. It also requires creating space for ideas and values to infiltrate human consciousness crossing the barrier of sectarian nationalism. Lenin's idea converted the former Russian empire into many territories with their own boundaries. Many had potential for emerging as independent states at some point in future. That unfortunately happened seventy years later in 1992.

But was there anything in internal affairs other than ideology that might have prompted Lenin to embrace the idea to construct the USSR as a voluntary union of quasi-independent national republics? It can't be said convincingly. But historical circumstances in post-revolutionary Russia during 1918–1921 suggest a possibility for that. Although in Soviet history, it is generally accepted that the civil war ended in 1921, it wasn't entirely true. Low-intensity localized battles were still raging in many parts of the country which the Red Army brought under its control. For Lenin to move forward with his state building plan, it was important to put an end to these battles. As an incentive to various conflicting groups to settle for compromise, Lenin put forward the idea of awarding territories to various nationalities. But it

wasn't easy, it required redrawing and redistribution of territories at a scale that had no precedence in the Tsarist empire. In most cases, it involved handing out historical Russian lands to other nationalities that was done arbitrarily without seeking opinion of people inhabiting these lands.

The biggest beneficiary of this process was Ukraine which saw its land area increase by two times when it was converted into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Lenin gave up large chunks of Russian land to Ukraine, such as the region of Donbass, Novorossya, and Malorossya (Odessa, Kherson, Nikolayev, and other areas) along the Black Sea coast . When in the recent past we heard that the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine had majority Russian speaking populations, it was because these lands were historically Russian. Was such a land transfer an essential precondition for building socialism? Why didn't Lenin think what would happen to Russian speaking populations of the regions transferred to Ukraine, should the Ukrainian SSR decide to leave the USSR at some point in future. It was a possibility because there was a clause in the constitution that allowed Union republics to exercise such a right at any time of their choosing.

Even when the USSR was a mature state having emerged as the second superpower following WWII, giving up Russian land to Ukraine continued. It was on 9 March 1954, just one year into his job as the Soviet Union's top leader after the death of Joseph Stalin on 5 March 1953, Nikita S. Khrushchev transferred the Crimea region, a proud civilizational symbol of historical Russia, to the Ukrainian SSR. The reason shown, as evident from the directive issued by the USSR Supreme Soviet, was territorial proximity, close economic and cultural relations between Crimea region and Ukrainian SSR in a common economy. But the official reason wasn't factually correct.

If the question was about cultural relations, the majority of Crimea's population was Russian. The entire USSR was a common economy because it was centrally planned and state-administered. The fact that Crimea was part of the RSFSR was in no way an impediment to its economic development. The real reason was that Nikita Khrushchev thought of himself more as an Ukrainian rather than a Russian. Although he was born in the bordering Kursk region, he spent most of his career in Ukraine. So, he took the first opportunity to enlarge the size of Ukraine by annexing to it a territory that historically belonged to Russia. It wasn't needed but done nonetheless. It happened because internationalism supposed to suppress nationalism in the multinational Soviet state couldn't flourish. There was never a serious commitment to that. Party leaders, although propagating proletarian internationalism, were always conscious of nationalism and their ethnic roots. So, whenever there was an opportunity to grab something from the common resource pool, which was the USSR, to benefit their ethnic republics, they didn't hesitate to do it. But in almost all cases, they did it at the expense of Russians , their lands and resources.

Leonid Ilych Brezhnev, the next Soviet leader to succeed Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, was also Ukrainian. But unlike Khrushchev, he was careful not to show in public too much of a soft corner for Ukraine but quietly did many things to accelerate scientific-technical and industrial development of the Ukrainian SSR with a particular focus on Dnepropetrovsk, his birthplace. As a result, a powerful Dnepropetrovsk clan took shape, whose representatives exercised tremendous power in the USSR during the Brezhnev era.

This influence was retained in the post-Soviet period. But it was not only Ukraine. Russian lands and assets were also transferred to the Kazakh Soviet Republic and some others too..

V.I. Lenin might have achieved his short-term goal of uniting all regions of post-Imperial Russia in a single state where the Bolshevik Party established its supremacy. In doing so, he left many complex inter-ethnic issues for future generations to take care of. Lenin didn't have much time to lead the state he gave birth to. He passed away on 21 January 1924, a little more than a year after the USSR was formed. The leadership of the USSR passed on to Joseph Stalin. He was a resolute leader strongly focused on internal state building. His approach to build socialism on the ruins of capitalism was decisive as opposed to Lenin's experimentation with the "New Economic Policy" which was restoration of capitalism in all but name. Although it was advocated as a strategic maneuvering to buy time to revive the economy, many activists in the Russian Communist Party (renamed Bolshevik Party) saw this backtracking as a betrayal and chose to leave the party.

After Lenin's death, Stalin decided to roll back the NEP. We didn't know what exactly prompted Stalin to take this step. But it was quite likely the emergence of a capitalist market economy in a country, which was a loose amalgamation of almost-independent countries, had the real risk of the Soviet Union melting away within a decade. Stalin replaced the NEP by a time-bound programme of construction of socialism. The first phase of socialist reconstruction was completed in the mid-1930s through successfully implementing programmes of socialist industrialization, collectivization of agriculture, and cultural revolution.

Selfless collective labour, strong discipline in the workplace, and strict responsibility for team managers to achieve production targets with no excuses allowed for non-compliance were among the key factors that drove the Soviet Union's rapid economic growth in the 1930s. The success of the Soviet socialist economy was in stark contrast to the Great Economic Depression that plunged the rest of the world at that time. This period was also the one that gave a tremendous boost to the concept that underlies construction of the Soviet state. Internationalist feelings among the citizens reigned supreme because people of various nationalities had the opportunity to come together and work shoulder-to-shoulder for the common good. This trend was further strengthened when Red Army units from various national republics fought together to defeat the German invaders in WWII. Soviet internationalist state building got a further boost during the post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Over this entire historic epoch, it was Stalin's strong leadership that helped suppress nationalist tendencies and transform the USSR into a powerful multinational state where internal borders were viewed as no more than a line with little significance. But that started changing after Stalin's death and the assumption of power by Nikita Krushchev in 1953. This transition of power was qualitatively different from the one from Lenin to Stalin. Both of them were organizers-revolutionaries, endured oppression and spent years in jail during the Tsarist rule. Their legitimacy for leadership roles stemmed from real contributions that were visible in plain sight. So, that Stalin would inherit power from Lenin wasn't unexpected from most people. But Krushchev wasn't the most likely candidate for the post of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the top position in the country's power hierarchy.

He never featured in the list of candidates who were in Stalin's mind to succeed him. But that didn't deter him from contesting for the leadership of the party. He resorted to hatching inner-party conspiracy to sideline other promising candidates and thus make his way to the top. Eventually he successfully did it. But it cast a long shadow on his rule. Khrushchev lacked moral authority. Eager to gain acceptance and respect from people, he portrayed himself as anti-Stalin and rolled back many practices of his strong governance system that helped, among others, suppress nationalist tendencies in inter-ethnic relations. To secure his power, Khrushchev had to engage in luring party central committee members to his side and strike alliances of convenience with them. Recently in an interview, Vladimir Medinski, Aide to President Putin on culture, disclosed that the real reason for Khrushchev to transfer Crimea to Ukraine was to consolidate personal power by striking an alliance of convenience with the party Central Committee members, many of whom were Ukrainians by nationality. So, it was done very quickly citing bogus reasons to pretend it was done in the greater interest of the entire country.

The way Khrushchev seized power in 1953, he lost it much in the same way a decade later in 1964 in a palace coup engineered by a fellow Ukrainian and his ally in the CPSU Central Committee, Leonid Illych Brezhnev. He also continued his predecessor's policy of consolidating power by supporting Ukraine-linked special interest groups based in his native Dnepropetrovsk, the industrial heartland of Ukraine. Although such actions satisfied the leaders' need of the hour, it started ruining the internationalist bond and encouraging nationalistic feelings among the people. It also set the ball rolling for disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The key to Stalin's success in suppressing nationalism was not only his strong leadership but his own firm conviction in internationalism and advancing it through concrete ways. However, he viewed internationalism through the prism of centrality of Russian people and peoples of other nationalities in the Soviet Union coalescing around it. Stalin's view of internationalism was in stark contrast with that of Lenin's. Because a proletariat revolution had happened that promised equality for all, Lenin was determined to pull down the Russians from the dominant position in the society and bring them at par with every other nationality in the country. Lenin also viewed it as a reasonable price that Russians must pay to buy off the collective guilt for their colonial exploitation of peoples of other nationalities

If we leave aside idealism and try to look impassionately at what V.I. Lenin did to the historical Russian state (he was also a Russian by nationality) to promote his vision of internationalism, the perfect name of the action is betrayal. For political leaders, trying to be internationalist is OK, but they have to be patriotic and home-bound first. Lenin's view of Russians to pay for their collective guilt could still make sense if the national republics were part of the original proletarian state created in 1918, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). This is what Joseph Stalin advocated for when the USSR was formed. Stalin was an internationalist but not at the cost of sacrificing Russia and voluntarily diminishing its status in the so-called "family of fraternal republics", which was purely delusional.
It was demonstrated uniquely in his speech at the reception in honour of the commanders of the Red Army units leading the WWII to victory organized in the Kremlin on 24 May 1945. Below is an excerpt from his speech:
"Comrades, allow me to propose one more, final toast.

I, as a representative of our Soviet government, would like to propose a toast to the health of our Soviet people and, above all, the Russian people.
I drink, first of all, to the health of the Russian people because it is the most outstanding nation of all the nations that make up the Soviet Union.
I propose a toast to the health of the Russian people because of what they earned in this war and also because of what they earned before, if you want to see it that way, the title of the leading force of our Soviet Union among all the peoples of our country.
I propose a toast to the health of the Russian people not only because they are the ruling people, but also because they are endowed with healthy thinking, general political common sense and patience.
Our government made many mistakes, we had moments of despair in 1941-1942, when our army retreated, abandoned our native villages and cities of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Leningrad region, the Karelo-Finnish Republic, abandoned them because there was no other way out.
Some other nation could have said: you have not lived up to our expectations, we will install another government that will make peace with Germany and ensure us peace. This could have happened, keep that in mind.
But the Russian people did not agree to this, the Russian people did not compromise, they showed boundless trust in our government.
I repeat, we made mistakes, the first two years our army was forced to retreat, it turned out that we did not master the events, did not cope with the situation that had arisen. However, the Russian people believed, endured, waited and hoped that we would still cope with the events.
For this trust in our government, which the Russian people have shown us, thank them very much!
For the health of the Russian people!"
Stalin concluded his speech by making this remarkable statement:
"I am not a Georgian - I am a Russian of Georgian origin"

Russia's centrality in the USSR and Russia-friendly policies were maintained throughout Stalin's rule. But with the arrival of Nikita Khrushchev, old-fashioned internationalism of the 1920s came back with full force. There was no shortage of posters, placards and slogans to highlight the beauty of Soviet internationalism. But in reality it marked the beginning of taking away a much higher share of the Russian Federation's income and resources than it was done during the period of Stalin's rule to fund development elsewhere in the Soviet Union. The RSFSR had to accept the reality of its economy growing at a much slower pace in order to support Lenin's vision of internationalism in Soviet state building.

Going back to Ukraine, we will take a detailed look at how it benefited from the generosity shown by both V.I Lenin and Joseph Stalin in terms of acquisition of new territories. Historically there was no separate Ukrainian ethnicity-based identity in Imperial Russia. What came to be known as Ukraine later was a territory of the Empire divided into mainly five governorates (provinces): Volyn, Kiev, Podolsk, Poltava and Chernigov. As we have stated before, in 1922 Lenin awarded a vast swathe of Russian territories, collectively known as Novorossya and Malorossya, to Ukraine to create the Ukrainian SSR, then in 1954 Khrushchev gifted to it Crimea and finally at the end of the WWII, Stalin annexed to it a large chunk of territories separated from Poland, Hungary, and Romania, making Ukraine the second-largest country in Europe after Russia. Hardly any other union republic in the Soviet Union

benefited so much from the Russian SFSR as did Ukraine. Logically then, Ukraine should have been immensely grateful to Russia. But as we are seeing now, that didn't happen. What happened was far worse as stated in the beginning. Post-Soviet Ukraine has become Russia's fiercest enemy. It allowed its territory to be used by the Western military alliance in its ongoing proxy war with Russia. It has also inserted in the constitution its aspirational goal to join the NATO military alliance. Beginning in 2014, Ukraine introduced "Decommunization", a policy that targets removing all kinds of symbols of Soviet-era heritage from all public places. Ironically, it also includes dismantling all monuments to V.I. Lenin, the architect of the Ukrainian SSR and Ukraine's biggest benefactor in centuries. This was how the Ukrainians paid back their debt to Lenin.

But It was not only Ukraine. Except Belarus all post-Soviet countries started decoupling from Russia despite Russia's frantic efforts to bind them in new security and economic alliances. The Baltic republics on the Soviet Union's western frontiers were invited to join the EU and NATO. Most Central Asian republics chose to tilt toward Turkey, which is also a NATO member. Russia was left with no ally barring Belarus in the post-Soviet landmass.

How all these say about V.I. Lenin's state building, which was the Soviet Union? We have stated at the beginning that it was fragile because it was poorly designed. It was in vivid display on 8 December 1991 when it took only three regional leaders – Boris Yeltsin (RSFSR), Leonid Kravchuk (Ukrainian SSR), and Stanislav Shushkevich (Belarussian SSR) – who gathered at the Viskuli residence at Belovezhskaya forest to agree on dismantling the Soviet Union. They simply invoked the article of the USSR constitution that granted the right of the Union republics to exit the Union. There was little then General Secretary of the CPSU, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, could do to prevent it from happening. He was left with no jurisdiction to rule and so he had to resign.

Lenin created the USSR the way it was to meet his immediate challenges at the home front and accommodate his globalist vision of proletarian revolution. At the home front, the immediate challenges were to end civil wars and unite all territories under the Red Army's control giving the regional stakeholders as much leeway as possible to entice them to join the Union . However, Lenin's main focus was not to recreate a socialist version of Russia-centric nation state. He designed the USSR as a global centre to support proletarian revolutions worldwide which were framed as international obligations of the Soviet state. Lenin believed working classes in other European countries would also rise up and seize power following the success of Russian revolutionaries. With this probability in mind, there was a provision in the USSR constitution to admit future proletarian states should they decide to join the USSR.

It was the main consideration for creating the USSR as a confederation rather than a cohesive unitary state. However, proletarian revolutions which Lenin hoped for didn't occur anywhere in Europe and no country outside the former Russian empire chose to join the USSR. So, Lenin's dream for the USSR to become a home for future proletarian states failed to materialize. The USSR, as a state, was left with its own built-in vulnerabilities to manipulations by regional leaders. Toward the end of the Soviet Union, central authorities in Moscow became more of a symbolic power because regional leaders succeeded in concentrating real powers in their hands. Except foreign policy and defence, they grabbed all powers.

By abruptly dissolving the Soviet Union without serious preparation for that, the three regional leaders didn't have any idea about what a destructive force they had released. That force, as we have stated above, was real-world issues that affect inter-ethnic relations in a multinational state that were left unaddressed. The hope was that internationalist slogans of friendship among nationalities and proletarian internationalism in the common socialist nation building would obscure and render those issues irrelevant. However, that hope wasn't realized. Those issues surfaced as the post-Soviet newly independent countries began to rewrite the rules of interaction with each other to assert their independence on the worldstage. Among them, expression of nationalism by all possible means was common for all countries. But it took the ugliest form in Ukraine after the country's elected government led by Victor Yanukovich was ousted in a coup plotted by the Western alliance in 2014. A pro-western hard-core nationalist government harboring extremely hostile sentiments to the country's large Russian speaking populations in the South and East of the country (former territories of Russia handed over by Lenin in 1922) took over. Russians were subjected to widespread repression and discrimination. The Russian language was denied official status and banned for use in public places. In response, Russian-speaking populations in Crimea and Donbass regions revolted.

With the support of the local Russian-speaking population, Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. It was a symbolic action because it corrected a historical injustice done to the people of Russia by Nikita Khrushchev. In the Donbass region Russian insurgents created two self-declared independent statelets – the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic – with tacit support by Russia. The brief war ended with a truce agreed upon by a contact group of four (Germany, Russia, France and Ukraine) on 12 February 2015. The historic agreement got the name Minsk-2 which sought to settle the grievances of the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine by providing wide ranging autonomy to these regions. However, low-intensity clashes between the Russian-speaking insurgents and the Ukrainian government forces continued.

The main promise of the Minsk agreement to provide autonomy to Russian-speaking regions wasn't implemented. The Western powers, guarantors of the agreement, weren't serious about implementing it. Rather they used it as a cover, as it was later acknowledged by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, to supply arms and ammunitions to the Ukrainian army and beef up its defense capabilities with the ultimate goal of absorbing Ukraine into the Western military alliance and using it as a launchpad for future military actions against Russia. The West finished its preparations toward the end of the 2020s. The US humiliatingly disentangled itself from its long war in Afghanistan to concentrate resources for the upcoming confrontation with Russia. For Russia, it was a red line posing a serious existential threat. Russia's concerted efforts to obtain guarantees from the West about its national security were rebuffed. Russia was left with no choice but to preempt the imminent invasion of the Ukrainian army into the rebel-held territories by launching its own Special Military Operation on 24 February 2022. The SMO wasn't supposed to last long. Within days after the SMO was launched, at the initiative of Belarus leader Aleksandr G.Lukashenko, Russia and Ukraine engaged in negotiations to end the war. As a result of those discussions, as recently disclosed by Vladimir Medinski, President Putin's aide and the head of Russia's delegation at the peace talks, Ukraine could sign the peace agreement on 28 February 2022 if it wanted,

when the country could still take decisions independently. Even in April 2022, this window was open for signing a peace agreement which Ukrainian and Russian negotiators finalized through a series of peace talks held in Istanbul, Turkey. But at the last moment the Ukrainian delegation balked away from signing the peace deal at the insistence of its foreign backers. By that time the US-led Western alliance made a principled decision to tie its military assistance to Ukraine with its larger goal of converting the conflict into NATO's covert war against Russia to bleed it and eventually defeat it in a battlefield, an illusory goal that remained out of reach for all foreign invaders in the past. Now, more than three years into the war, there is no sign that this goal will be achieved. On the contrary the opposite is more likely to happen as the war grinds on despite peace talks going on and off between Russia and Ukraine.

Russia has liberated most of the territories it claims its own, which V.I. Lenin separated from it to create the Ukrainian SSR. Ukraine has suffered enormous losses to its infrastructure, energy sector, industries not to mention the grave human tragedy of losing its male population to the extent that it stares at a demographic decline in the days ahead. It has effectively lost its autonomy and decision-making capacity on its vital national interests. Russia has also suffered enormous casualties and losses of its own. But that hasn't dented its capacity to continue the war till it achieves its stated war goals.

How does this ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, mostly the same people, fit the happy past when both used to live together in the fraternal family of peoples that made up the Soviet Union? Before that they lived together peacefully for centuries in the Russian empire whose identity was simply Russian. In the Soviet Union, Ukraine always played an influential role, it was essentially number two in importance after Russia. It was the leaders of Ukrainian descent who ruled the Soviet Union over a long period between 1954 and 1982. So, why did post-Soviet Ukraine choose a path that took it away from Russia so thoroughly that three decades later it emerged as more anti-Russia than itself?

The answer probably lies in what we have hinted at the beginning – how V.I. Lenin constructed the Soviet Union. The belief that just because capitalism was overthrown, the working class captured power to build socialism, a promise for equality and a sense of fraternity and proletarian internationalism would bind a diverse and complex mosaic of nationalities to live together in a single state for long was too simplistic. It is not to say those ideas didn't have value in state building. But they outlived their utility at some point and weren't replaced by new ideas to keep the USSR in a different world with new sets of challenges. Does this sad story vindicate our proposition that Lenin wanted a short-cut route to end civil wars in post-revolutionary Russia. He needed that to create a unified Soviet socialist state and begin construction of socialism at home and promote proletarian revolutions worldwide. Ironically, the civil wars, which V.I. Lenin wanted to end without addressing the root causes, erupted in different places on and off in the vast post-Soviet landmass since the USSR's disintegration in 1991. But we are now watching its deadliest form in the ongoing Ukraine-Russia civil war. It has fallen on the current leaders of Russia to address those root causes which were left unresolved when the Soviet Union was formed in 1922. Sadly, they are doing it, paying a heavy price in blood and treasure.

We know that the Soviet Union was a great country. It changed the course of human history in a fundamental way over most of the twentieth century. Without the presence of it, today's world could

have been a very different world. The country was a boon to the poor, oppressed people around the world. The Soviet Union's moral support was a significant factor in accelerating decolonization of Asia and Africa in the wake of WWII. Many newly independent countries benefited from wide-ranging material-technical and economic assistance provided by the Soviet Union. Domestically, all peoples inhabiting the USSR experienced a dramatic rise in their socio-economic status.

But behind this veil of stunning success of the Soviet state, there were also less rosy stories which were carefully hidden from the public view. Few CPSU policymakers dared to talk about those aspects in party congresses. Because it would have required renegotiating the agreement that created the USSR with regard to accommodation of diverse nationalities in internal boundaries and a fair sharing of the burden to finance economic development in less developed regions of the country. Specifically, it was about lessening the burden from the RSFSR to provide development funding to other national republics. When the central authorities in Moscow took too long to take meaningful actions to modernize the Soviet state, regional leaders came forward to defend vital interests of their own republics. The Soviet Union's demise symbolizes the failure of an experiment to find an alternative to capitalism in a context where the essential preconditions for doing that were absent. But still it could have a chance to succeed if the original post-revolutionary state, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), were allowed to exist and not replaced by a complex artificial state which was the Soviet Union. In 2025, the Soviet Union is a distant memory to Russia's new generation.

But it isn't forgotten. In the light of today's realities which are vastly different from those of 1991, they feel proud of their glorious Soviet past and pay due respect to their leaders who brought fame and glory to their country. As part of this effort, an artistic composition was unveiled on 15 May 2025 in the Moscow subway in the passage between the Taganskaya and Taganskaya Koltsevaya stations where Joseph Stalin occupies the central place.